



PROJECT MUSE®

**Research Theatre, Climate Change, and the Ecocide
Project: A Casebook by Una Chaudhuri and Shonni Enelow
(review)**

Theresa May

Theatre Journal, Volume 67, Number 3, October 2015, pp. 567-568 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: 10.1353/tj.2015.0079



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/tj/summary/v067/67.3.may.html>

BOOK REVIEWS

Ryan Claycomb, Editor

RESEARCH THEATRE, CLIMATE CHANGE, AND THE ECOCIDE PROJECT: A CASE-BOOK. By Una Chaudhuri and Shonni Enelow. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014; pp. 142.

Over the past twenty years, Una Chaudhuri has pioneered ecocritical approaches to theatre and performance studies, and more recently has continued to lead through her turn to critical animal studies and “theatre of species.” This volume, written with Shonni Enelow, might be seen as an evolutionary leap in strategic ecocritical practice by building on that work, but also challenging it with unselfconscious candor about what ecotheatre has missed. Preoccupied with artistic rescue efforts, dystopian warnings, or ecojustice advocacy, theatre has missed an opportunity to apply the language and capacity of performance directly to the actualities of a changed world. In a demonstration of how the “vast resources of live, embodied performance at the service of the program of radical reimagination called for by the perilous predicament we find our species—and others—in today,” this multivocal volume answers a cry for theory to inform practice (2). Offering both a practical methodology and a kind of manifesto for a new theatre aesthetic, one that updates the subgenre of ecotheatre, Chaudhuri and Enelow demonstrate how theatre’s unique ways of knowing can be crucial in the current ecological crisis.

In the opening chapter, Chaudhuri lays out the principles and central aspects of “research theatre,” a methodology in which key critical-theory questions find application in the imaginative and embodied process of theatre-making. A team of scholars and artists begin with an “initiating set of research questions, a critical discourse, and a series of improvisatory explorations called ‘etudes’” (1). Research theatre is a practical tool with which to investigate social, political, and ecological conditions: research that uses the capabilities of theatre in order to open

up new ways of thinking, perceiving, knowing. The chapter overviews three theatre research projects that arose out of specific discourses. The “colonization of identity and experience by corporate logics” led to the Resistance Project; Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of “becoming animal” informed the Animal Project (5, 9). Chaudhuri’s crystalline discussion of these earlier projects demonstrates the Ecocide Project’s research protocol, while her theoretical illuminations of the imaginative experiments that artists undertook prepare the reader for a closer look at the etudes described later.

The two-year collaboration among dramaturg-theorist, playwright, director, designers, and performers culminated in a performance. This volume of essays leads the reader from its foundational critical questions through practice, performance, and reflection, and invites the reader to wrestle with the implications of climate change that informed the Ecocide Project. What might it mean for theatre artists to rise to the occasion of climate-change science, or to creatively embrace the vast time scales and geologic temporalities of climate change? What becomes of human agency—so central to Western drama—when natural history and human history collapse? *Carla and Lewis*, the play written by Enelow based on the project’s improvisational research, also appears in the volume. But the book emphasizes *process*, arguing that events that transpired in the studio/laboratory and performance were always in a state of flux. In other words, the play is *not* the thing. Theatre research projects aim at destabilizing old concepts (such as the “bright line” between species) through newly made lived experience. Thus, the play itself cannot be read as a “result” nor as a text to be reproduced elsewhere; it maps the experiments that preceded it, like patterns in mud hardened into contours after the water has receded.

In chapter 2, “Theorizing Ecocide: The Theatre of Eco-Cruelty,” Chaudhuri and Enelow tease out emergent questions in the discourse of climate change—not only on how climate change produces

what Rob Nixon has called “slow violence,” but also how it gives rise to “geological agency, which operates on a scale that not only defies the imagination but also defeats the methods and modes of human inquiry” (25). The Ecocide Project, the authors explain, took on the challenge of imagining beyond not only the human, but also beyond the traditional temporal frames of human agency and identity—the “new version of ‘us,’ suggested by the reclassification of humankind as a geophysical force” (27). The chapter usefully re-tools Artaud’s *Theatre of Cruelty* and explicates the project’s application of contemporary philosophies (particularly those addressing perilous ecological shifts) through theatre practice. Invoking Susan Bennett’s notion of “vital matter” and Bruno Latour’s “actant,” the project team used theatre to “literalize and materialize the porousness and diversity of the ecological world” (29). Drawn to the queer ecology theories of Timothy Morton and Lee Edelman, the collaborators identified desire as “the quintessential life force,” and then applied its transgressively creative, co-adaptive, nonlinear, self-implicating, and often disruptive and always intimate ways of imagining and being in the world as methodology for creative exploration (30).

Director Fritz Ertl’s “A Research Theatre Process: The Ecocide Project” (chapter 3) captures the immediacy of theatre-making processes in thick descriptions of three workshops aimed to deepen performers’ engagement with queer ecology through the practice of transformation, mutation, and hybridity. He describes etudes like “becoming landscape,” “an accumulation of intimate encounters,” or “one moment of mutation” (50). These activated a “discovery of liveness to be found in the inanimate, of the vibrancy of objects and of the landscapes that contain them,” and demanded that performers “allow evolutionary life to *actually* take place on stage” (57; emphasis in original). Artists may be drawn to these as outlines for improvisation on ecological themes, but a commitment to the theoretical ideas driving the methodologies will be critical.

Co-director Josh Hogland then describes his work to ground “theoretical ideas of ecology into the actors’ bodies,” and to shape those “intimate encounters” into a performance that allowed “the artists and the audience [to] come through the other side of the performance mutated, destabilized, irrevocably changed” (63–64). Enelow, who wrote text in response to the performers’ inquiries, describes some frustration as her “job became less exploratory, and more about making things work, giving the production team a script they could understand and use” (78). Enelow’s refreshing self-reflexivity may underscore the conundrum of research theatre producing art intended for reception, yet also reminds us that theatre is not and never has been a “thing,” but is

always part of the ecological ephemera of everyday life. A butterfly, like a performance, is the brief whisper of geological eons leaning into the future. Like geological strata, this book tells a story, one that invites artists and scholars to lean into that future.

THERESA MAY
University of Oregon

PERFORMANCE ON BEHALF OF THE ENVIRONMENT. Edited by Richard D. Besel and Jnan A. Blau. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014; pp. 288.

Performance on Behalf of the Environment is a collection of essays that represents a timely interdisciplinary addition to the growing body of scholarship on performance and ecology. The book has its origins in communications studies, with several of the essays stemming from a panel on environmental performance at the 2010 National Communication Association Convention. As such, the methodological approaches adopted by many of the authors provocatively intersect the fields of rhetoric, communications studies, performance studies, and theatre studies. As a whole, the book provides an interdisciplinary cross-pollination that may help shape and direct future scholarship on ecology and performance, as well as future environmentally oriented theatre and performance work.

The book is organized in three sections. The first section, “Performers and Audiences,” primarily has contributions from communications studies scholars and focuses on performer/audience interactions. The range of topics here includes a chapter by David Terry and Anne Marie Todd that considers the formation of community through the coincident performance of the San José Bike Party, and an essay by Alison Bodkin looking at the role of humor in environmental messaging. A strength of this opening section—for theatre scholars, perhaps, in particular—is the use of the tools of rhetorical theory to try to draw some conclusions about the efficacy of political and environmental performances vis-à-vis their audiences. For example, in his chapter on animal liberation activism, Jason Del Gandio argues that by practicing “radical immediacy: i.e., the immediate evocation of one’s desired world” (42), the Animal Liberation Front and Earth Liberation Front (two groups often accused of “ecoterrorism” because their tactics include destroying the property of businesses they see as harmful to animals or the environment) create “ruptures” in the assumptions we take for granted. While the messages of these groups may be subject to debate, their embodied